Prodigal Pioneers

Up on the Edge of the World You'll Find the

By
JEAN ANNE SUMMERS

IF YOU'RE A "do-it-yourself" fan, and have visions of building your own home, you may find this article helpful in putting you off the idea altogether.

I was a city girl, an accountant for years, and scarcely knew one end of a hammer from the other, so I was and still am the unskilled, unpaid but not entirely unwanted laborer. The one who passes things, takes orders and has to be a mind reader for the boss (my husband) whose building experience up to a year or two ago was written in three words—a wood shed.

In 1956 we decided that as we owed nothing on our (then) house, car, furniture and such, our two girls were growing up and our German shepherd needed a bigger living room in which to wag his tail, we'd build a new house.

Within a short while we'd decided on the location. No one had ever built in that area before and we were going to pioneer. The lot—(175 by 450 feet)—was atop a cliff, access to which was a steep road winding up and around the hill, but with an unsurpassed view of the sea on one side and trees on the other.

Before we'd even bought the land we had to make our first investment, a 100-foot tape with which to measure off the exact size of our lot. The entire area was second growth timber and the slashings of a decade or two ago were almost covered by underbrush. No matter, we'd just put on our old clothes and measure off our estate. With much crashing through, climbing over and crawling under, we did it. At least Glen said we did it. I merely stood on an old stump with one end of the tape in my hand and made "hallooing" sounds so that Glen could tell approximately where I was.

We bought the land, and a cat cleared a winding drive and the site of the house in November, 1956. During Christmas week we laid 350 feet of waterpipe in a ditch down the driveway and celebrated Boxing Day by picking at the half-frozen earth in an attempt to cover it up. And there the project rested until spring of 1957.

We had a professional pour the footings and build the cement block walls where necessary. So as to take advantage of the natural slope of the land toward the sea view, we decided on a ground level basement that side and a single storey appearance on the higher side. That way we could put in a self-contained basement suite and live in it while finishing the upstairs. Everything was planned so that we'd suffer no inconvenience as far as living comfort went. We'd finish the suite, then move in and sell our other house, after our elder daughter had finished Grade 2 in June.

Then, before the walls were up, we had a chance to sell, for cash, the house we were then living in. Luckily, friends of ours were going to Europe for nine weeks and they suggested we move into their house and store our furniture in their basement. This seemed an ideal suggestion for surely we could finish the basement in nine weeks.

The move was accomplished in bits and pieces with Glen continuing his eight-hour shift at the pulp mill while working on the new house in his "spare" time.

ONE EVENING we drove up to the new house and saw a car parked near our water line. Out of the bushes walked a fellow with fresh dried laundry over his arm. Apparently his job had recently folded up, so while waiting for another to turn up he'd cut down expenses by sleeping in his car and working off his meals at a nearby cafe. His ablutions were by courtesy of our water pipe. He seemed to know quite a lot about building, so Glen hired him to help on the house which by this time was at the first storey level. The shiplap was down and the upper wall studding was ready to be cut.

A friend offered to help with this and one Sunday Glen, Joe and myself set up a "green chain" gang. The men measured very carefully, the saw buzzed, the two by fours slid down a ramp and I carefully stacked them. At the end of a hot, sticky afternoon we had 240 studs cut and neatly piled. Glen and Joe assembled a whole wall and were on the point of spiking it when they noticed something odd. They could reach over the top of it! Every one of those 240 studs was 12 inches short!

Philosophically they cut more, but without my help.

The rough plumbing was completed soon after, but we had to have a jack hammer to dig the sewage tank. After the plumbing came the pouring of the concrete basement floor. Glen came home at 8 a.m. after working eight hours and he and our car-sleeping helper and the ready-mix truck were busy all day. At 5 p.m. Glen decided he'd better sleep a while and asked our helper to finish trowelling while the cement set. Our Man Friday said he knew just what to do, and we needn't worry. The next day we arrived to find he'd flooded the floor with water in the belief that the cement would level off as it floated to the top. It floated all right. It floated right out of the door and we were left with a lovely gravelly basement floor.

MAN FRIDAY had disappeared the previous evening so he didn't hear the unkind things we said about him. However, he reappeared the next week and seemed hurt when we said how annoyed we were, but our faith in him was shattered and we took care in future to give him only work we knew he could do.

The fireplace and chimney were built in a weekend by three friends from out of town who came up for a dual purpose: One to earn extra cash and the other to have a night out away from marital eyes. They were housed and fed at our friends' place where our nine-week tenancy was almost up. Before they returned from Europe we had to have some semblace of modern living in our new home to enable us to camp there for the rest of the summer, so we bought a steel kitchen sink unit and a toilet.

By the time we moved in in July we had temporary water, temporary power, shiplap on the outer walls and two by four studding on the inner walls. The roof was on but the backfill wasn't done on the one-storey side and we had a gangplank from the driveway to the front door spanning a 12-foot chasm. One thing, it deterred sigtseers and visitors.

Camping in our new house was going to be fun we decided, until our West Coast weather broke and the skies poured rain for weeks on end. I'd a sink and cold water, I'd a new stove, but had to use a primus for cooking, and we'd a furnace but it wasn't installed.

The fireplace was the centre of our life. On it I heated dishwater, bathwater and laundry water. Over the fireplace, between the studding, I had string for clothes lines on which I hopefully hung our washing to dry.

Our fuel consisted of logs, green and saturated, which hissed at me in derision whenever I tried to coax them into giving out a little more heat.

WE INSTALLED the toilet and bath in the upstairs bathroom, but this wasn't very convenient for taking a bath. Besides the lack of hot water, for a while we had to listen carefully for footsteps up the gangplank, and yell a warning if someone were bathing behind the two by fours. The heavy duty wiring was finally complete and I went on a cooking spree with my new stove. It felt wonderful to know I could bake again whenever I wished, and as the hot-water tank now worked I had gallons of hot water. Oh, luxury!

However, the installation of the furnace was not yet complete and when a wind blew from the sea it found every knothole in the shiplap sheathing walls, whistled in, collected up every scrap of heat and rushed up through the roof with it. Another thing about having no ceilings is that you never know when bugs and spiders are going to lose their foothold on the roof and fall on you. In the quiet of the evening you'd hear odd plops on the bare floors and know something had dived near you.

All this time the children were in heaven. No one said, "Don't fingermark the doors." There weren't any. No one said, "Keep clean," how could you? No one said, "Be tidy," the whole place was untidy, with packing boxes, bits and pieces hanging on nails and sawdust everywhere.

For extra companionship, because we have no neighbors, we'd got the children, another dog, a black Spaniel puppy. Training her was easy with bare floors and no doors. Of course, her daytime perch was the hearth on wet days and she'd curl up as close to the hissing logs as she could get. At night we couldn't close the bedroom doors on her and she always slept on, or in, our elder daughter's bed while the German Shepherd slept on a rug at the foot of ours.

Both dogs considered the toilets their personal drinking fountains and they'd bark until you flushed cold water in the bowls. Bare floors don't spoil as waxed ones do so we didn't chastise them, but I often wished I could fit them with slippers for the click of their claws sounded like riflefire in the night.

One basement window was missing as we'd been sent the wrong size, and the dogs used this as their entrance and exist on occasions. When we finally puttied in the glass we were able to enjoy it for only half an hour. Then the big dog jumped right through it!

WE WATERPROOFED the cement blocks, prior to backfilling, with a thick tar-like substance, which the dogs persistently tracked into the house, but after the backfilling we finally got their paws cleaned.

At odd moments we'd found time to put on the building paper and siding and I'd done the painting, one thing I can do quite well. It was great fun and I loved the way it attracted every fly, mosquito and moth in the area. After biting me they'd dash to their sticky end against the paint and their corpses make a very interesting pattern on the trim. We have quite a few flies here, especially the "no-see-ums" that can raise such large lumps in hard-to-get-at places. That summer they were so thick you daren't even open your mouth to say "Ouch" when you hit your thumb with the hammer.

The fall of 1957 was a long dry one so we concentrated on getting the outside work done. Inside we still had open walls, plywood floors and no ceilings.

When the cat came to backfill we decided to remove the dead and crumbling stump that was smack in the middle of the driveway. We were assurred it would go easily. The driver of the cat gave it a push, then another and that old stump just leered at him, and never moved an inch. He tied a steel cable around it and pulled and the cable broke. In fact it broke three times and the stump still stood firm. We decided to dig around it and loosen the roots. Even the dogs helped but when we exposed the roots we found they were not rotten or small. There were just three big roots going deep down toward China.

During the next day we used the saw on them, and finally in bits and pieces the stump broke off and was carried away. If ever we burn that wood we're going to figure out how much each flame cost us for the cat had worked 11 hours on it at $7 an hour.

If you've ever suffered from the effects of poison oak or ivy, you'll know how particles of insulation feel down your back, for with the approach of winter we decided to insulate the inside of the house. The bats of insulation drooping between the ceiling joists reminded me of a Bedouin tent but the outside livestock were not camels. We discovered we had a she bear and her two black cubs in our vicinity, and the dogs constantly barked when they got their scent. We still have an abundance of deer, grouse, squirrels and a raccoon. The first time we saw the latter was when it dashed up a dead tree trunk as we drove around one evening before we moved in.

BY CHRISTMAS we were living in the downstairs apartment, and were quite comfortable, but our larger furniture was still scattered about upstairs and linens were still in boxes.

FFiends helped with the lathing during the winter months and the plasterers were finished by Easter, 1958.

Up to then gardening had been impossible but Glen rented a small cat with a spring-toothed harrow as soon as the mud had dried. The winter rains had swept all our topsoil down the cliff, and as the children preferred the slide down the cliff to the more circuitous route of the road when they went for the school bus, I've used gallons of bleach in an effort to take the stains out of their clothes.

After Glen had uncovered the earth below all the weeds, I decided that vigorous work was necessary in the would-be garden.

I assembled spades, forks, rakes ready for the onslaught, but very quickly discovered that the only tool needed was a pick, with a strong arm at one end, for this whole area was once a glacier and you can count one ton of rocks for every pound of soil. If you moved every visible rock today you'd find a new layer tomorrow. I suggested to Glen that the easiest thing would be to squash the lot with green cement but as he isn't in agreement we are working on the project a little a time and if we pile the rocks along the property line we'll have an impenetrable wall if ever we get undesirable neighbors.

If the birds would only let our seeds alone we might someday have a garden, for we have visions of rolling green lawns, lazy afternoons with cool drinks on the sundeck, and nothing, just nothing to do, but bask in the beauty of our surroundings. So far it is just a dream, for there's still lots to do; but sometimes we'll realize these dreams, and if you're in the neighborhood we'd like you to join us, for we're very proud of our home.

You see, we did it all ourselves.